

THE DEEPEST CHALLENGE

There are ~~two~~^{three} Bible texts which taken together present ~~in a rather indirect way~~ the greatest challenge facing the Korean church today. The first text is I John 4:20: "If any one says, 'I love God', and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has ~~not~~ seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen." ~~And~~ The second text is Mark 8:36: "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" ~~But it is the third text which puts the challenge best - simply and positively: I John 4:7, "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God."~~

Put those ~~two~~ texts together and they point to what I think is the deepest challenge facing the Korean church. That challenge is the challenge to unity.

A year ago at the 64th General Assembly I preached on the subject, "The Greatest Challenge". I said that the greatest challenge facing the Korean church is Asia. I still believe that is true. The greatest missionary challenge facing the church is the continent of Asia, which has more people and fewer Christians than any other of the great continents.

But today I want to speak about another challenge just as important, just as demanding and just as difficult, but even deeper. It is a spiritual challenge. The missionary challenge looks out toward a whole continent, and a whole world lost without Christ. The challenge to church unity looks deeply inward at ourselves. It looks at a church which can lose its own soul if it loses its unity in love in Jesus Christ. It looks at a church which can no longer say it loves God, if it does not love its own brothers, according to ~~John~~ John's first epistle. And the gospel of Mark adds, "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?"

If we take those texts and apply them to the church, not just to the individual, this is ~~what~~ how they challenge us. They are saying, "You want to win Asia for Christ. Good. That is a great challenge, ~~the greatest of missionary challenges.~~ ^{But it is not the} But that is not enough. Here is an even deeper challenge, "What shall it profit you, oh Korean churches, if you evangelize the whole world and lose your own soul?"

There are three things I want to say about this challenge. First, the challenge to church unity is a painful challenge. Second, it is a Biblical challenge. And third, it is a missionary challenge.

First, the challenge to unite is painful. It is a call to recognize our sins of division and repent. And we Presbyterians have more to repent of than anyone else, at least in Korea. ~~We are the most divided church in this whole country.~~ But not just in Korea. An Anglican historian, Bishop Stephen Neill, has written, "Of all forms of church organization (in church history), Presbyterianism has been the most divisive."

Look at the tragic situation here in Korea. It is true that the Korean church is one of the fastest growing churches in the world, but it is also the most divided. Some years ago the Korean Handbook of Religions reported that Christians here are divided into more than 60 different denominations.

There are even divisions inside the denominations. There are two different church groups that call themselves Seventh Day Adventists, for example, and two that call themselves Songkyol-kyo. There are four different kinds of Korean Baptists, and six different kind of Pentecostals. But the most divided of all the church families is the Presbyterian. I don't know how many times it has split and split again. Some say there are 14 different kinds of Korean Presbyterians; others say there are more than 20. We Presbyterians even split apart the name of Jesus Christ. Some of us call ourselves Jesus Presbyterians, while others call themselves Christ Presbyterians. "Is Christ divided?"

A Korean church, when it has lost its unity, presents a tragic appearance to unbelievers. But the Korean church is not the only church to lose its unity. I must confess that the church in America is just as bad.

There are more than 250 different religious bodies in the list of American denominations. They range in size from the huge Roman Catholic church which has some 45 million members, and large Protestant bodies like the Southern Baptist with 13 million and the United Methodist with 9 million,-- to tiny little groups which may have only one church congregation, like the "Two-in-the-seed Predestination Baptists" who have only 200 members, and an even smaller Mormon denomination, the Cutlerite Mormons, which has only 23 members. I have even heard of one peculiar denomination in America called "The No Television Baptist Church" which teaches that it is a sin to watch television. In America the Baptists are even more badly divided than the Presbyterians. There are about 19 Presbyterian and Reformed denominations there, but there are 28 or 30 different kinds of Baptists, and 22 different kinds of American Methodists.

This is the painful reality of our divisions in the body of Christ. No matter how missionary-minded we may be, if we have lost our unity, the Lord will be saying to us, "What shall it profit you if you gain the whole world and lose your own soul?" It is a painful challenge.

II. It is also a Biblical challenge.

Some may say, "Is it really a sin to have divisions in the church? Aren't they only expressions of our honest differences? After all, even the New Testament church was divided. There were factions in the church in Corinth: Paul's party, Peter's party, Apollos's party. Some even said, "We're the best of all. We are Christ's party". And there were divisions in the Galatian church: Judaizers against followers of Paul. So why criticize the church today? Even though it was divided, Paul still ~~called~~ ~~it~~ considered the Corinthian church a true church, "the church of God which is at Corinth", he called it. Hasn't the church always been divided?"

I am afraid that is true. The church has always been divided ever since its first days of unity after Pentecost. But that does not make it right. The Lord still challenges the church to be united. It is a painful challenge, but it is a Biblical challenge.

Yes, the church in Corinth was divided, but that is precisely why Paul was guided by the Holy Spirit to write to Corinth and rebuke the divisions and call for unity. "Is Christ divided?" he asked. All through Scripture the unity of the church is declared and taught. The church is called "the bride of Christ", and the heavenly bridegroom can have but one bride. And the church is called "the body of Christ". Christ is ~~not a~~

the one head of one body. He is not a many-bodied monster. "There is one body and one Spirit," writes Paul in Ephesians 4:14.

Our forefathers recognized this truth, and from the very beginnings of the Presbyterian church in the days of Calvin and Zwingli worked and prayed to keep the Reformation from dividing into quarreling churches. In 1529, led by Zwingli they asked for a conference with the Lutherans to seek reunion. They met at Marburg and Martin Luther himself was persuaded to attend. Their theologians had drawn up a list of fifteen points on which Lutherans and Presbyterians seemed to disagree but as they talked together many of the points of difference disappeared. After one week of deep theological discussion, out of the fifteen points they were able to agree on fourteen points. Only one point separated them. It was about the Lord's Supper. What do the bread and the wine represent. They even managed to agree about the wine. But not about the bread. To the Presbyterians the bread only symbolizes the body of Christ. Luther angrily said, "No". He insisted on taking the verse literally. "Christ said, 'This is my body", he shouted. And on that half point they failed to reach agreement. Still today that half point separates the 90 million Lutherans from 60 million Presbyterians all around the world.

When the meeting was over, Zwingli went up to shake hands with Luther, but Luther refused. Still angry, he said, "I cannot have fellowship with those of other minds".

There is an important lesson here on what kind of unity the Bible teaches. It does not make unity more important than truth. We cannot criticize Luther for insisting on the authority of Scripture. We can even respect his determined ~~XXXXXX~~ defence of his own interpretation of Scripture. The Bible does not teach that unity is more important than truth. The Bible's challenge to the church is rather that it must hold the truth in love, as we read in Ephesians 4:15, and this is where sometimes even in the General Assembly we fail to live up to the challenge. Here even the great Luther failed. He refused to shake hands with a brother who disagreed with him, and that was a sin. The challenge to unity is a Biblical challenge, straight from the Word of God. "With one spirit and one mind," wrote Paul in Philippians 1:27, "strive side by side for the faith of the gospel."

III. Finally, the challenge to unity is a missionary challenge.

I spoke a while ago as though there were two challenges to the church: as though the greatest challenge is the challenge to mission, and the deepest challenge is the challenge to unity. But the two cannot really be separated. If we fail in unity, we will also fail in mission. How can we expect the world to believe in peace and love and salvation in Christ when they see us fighting, dividing and slandering each other.

In 1935 Azariah of Dornakal, the first Indian bishop in the Anglican church, met with Dr Ambedkar the leader of India's millions of outcastes. The outcastes were disillusioned with Hinduism which condemned them to social contempt. The bishop said to their leader, "You are right in wanting to lead your people out of Hinduism, but they cannot live without a religion. It is

not enough to leave Hinduism. You must give them something better." And he witnessed to Dr. Ambedkar of the love of God in Jesus Christ.

For a while Dr. Ambedkar was silent. Then he said, "I deeply appreciate all that you Christians have done for the outcastes. But outcastes though we are, and despised by society, we have one strength. We are at least one community all over India. Our strength is in our unity. Can you in the Christian church offer us a unity like that"? And the good bishop, remembering with pain how badly the church in India was divided, could not answer.

Lack of unity in the church in India at that critical moment, ~~XXXXXX~~ lost it its greatest opportunity in a hundred years to bring the millions upon millions of India's outcastes to Jesus Christ and his salvation. Many of them became Buddhist. Even more of them turned away from all religion.

I pray that the church in Korea will not make the same mistake as the church in India. Here is your deepest challenge, the challenge to unity. Already there are signs that the day of rapid church growth in Korea may be coming to an end. Unbelievers are increasingly critical of Christians for our church quarrels and lack of unity. "He who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen." "And what shall it profit you if you win the whole world and lose your own soul."

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